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Engaging Non-Arts Students In Arts Administration

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This article explores the unique challenges and opportunities experienced while teaching an Introduction to Arts Administration class with undergraduate students who are largely unfamiliar with the arts. After a review of current academic literature on the topic of student engagement and retention, the conversation will turn to specific strategies and methods utilized by one adjunct professor at a Research One university. These strategies are informed by Lev Vygotsky's theory on the Zone of Proximal Development and the idea of student constructed scaffolding. Making arts administration relevant to this group of students requires considerable attention to learning their individual experiences and how those experiences can be utilized to make new lessons in arts administration relevant, important, and worthy of their mental attention. Within this theory, teaching does not wait for student development but, instead, advances it. Teachers must know learners well, to enable the provision of appropriate and sufficient guidance, and then slowly remove that guidance as the learner successfully learns and then executes the lesson alone. Vygotky's theory stated that students must necessarily take an active and creative role in their own learning. When they are encouraged and enabled to do that, they are able to reconstruct new knowledge in ways that they understand, thereby increasing their understanding into new areas and new applications (Vygotsky, 1981).

Methods

This paper incorporates classroom experiences of the instructor and interprets them through a constructivist lens, blending those experiences with current and historic literature on teaching and learning. The research began informally, with one educator exploring the classroom and testing what worked and did not work for a particular group of students.

Fully grounded in scholarly literature, this research relies on largely anecdotal evidence of how to achieve active student engagement in an elective undergraduate course. One weakness of anecdotal evidence is that it is not always typical and can lead to faulty conclusions (Altman & Bland, 1995). Without further research, these concepts are introductory. They do not provide proof but are intended to open a dialogue about effective teaching strategies for university level students.

Literature Review

The educational theory of Constructivism thrives into the 21st century. It emphasizes the notion that each student is an active learner who is pursuing his or her own individual educational path. By incorporating elements of the classical empiricist epistemology of John Locke, constructivism, holds that each student in a classroom constructs his or her own individual body of understandings, even when all in the group are given what appears to be the same stimulus or educational experience (Phillips & Siegel, 2015).

Constructivism emphasizes the importance of the active involvement of learners in constructing knowledge and concepts to aid them in acquiring new knowledge. Knowledge is "constructed" by using already attained knowledge as a foundation for building new understanding. In this way, constructivism relies on what students already know before they enter the classroom. Lessons should be built upon student's existing knowledge and experiences (Bodner, Klobuchar & Geelan ,2001). The theory of constructivism includes active learning, discovery learning, and knowledge building, with all of these promoting the free exploration of students within a given framework. The instructor is a facilitator, or a more-capable peer, who

encourages students in their own self-construction of knowledge. Autonomy is promoted and curiosity and discussion among students are encouraged (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

The theory of constructivism rests on two main principles. First, knowledge is not passively received but actively built up by the thinking student, and second, the function of cognition is adaptive and serves to organize the student's world of experience. Knowing is active, individual and personal, based on previously constructed knowledge, continually adaptive and evolving (Pardjono, 2016).

Perhaps his most lasting legacy to theories of education and learning was the original idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the difference between what a learner can do without help, and what they cannot do. "There is a gap between any student's…actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). He theorized that before any instruction could begin, the teacher had to first determine the ZPD. First, by establishing the student's current developmental level and then determining the student's level of potential development at the current time, the instructor identifies the student's ZPD (Pardjono, 2016). Vygotsky also emphasized internalized processing of stimuli into new learning structures, theorizing that social relations and cognitive processes worked in tandem to construct knowledge (Duveen, 1997). The theory of ZPD would be further developed after Vygotsky's death to incorporate the concept of scaffolding in knowledge construction (Pardjono, 2016).

Another important component in Vygotsky's constructivist philosophy is the concept of intersubjectivity. When two participants begin a task with different understandings and arrive at a shared understanding, intersubjectivity is accomplished. For this to occur, both participants must be working toward the same goal, to achieve collaboration and effective communication. Intersubjectivity relies on negotiation and compromise (Vygotsky, 1978; Pardjono, 2002).

Vygotsky placed a great emphasis on the role of mediators in a child's construction of knowledge. The mediator could be a more-capable peer, an adult, or other teacher, but the observation of others executing a desired outcome was critical to knowledge construction, in Vygotsky's estimation (Duveen, 1997). In fact, according to Vygotsky, learning is the process of performing activities that can only be performed with the help of others (Vygotsky, 2016; Pardjono, 2016).

More recent research confirms many of Vygotsky's theories about how students learn and how teachers should teach to facilitate that learning. Boser (2019) emphasized several key aspects of learning in teenagers, two of which will be explored here. First, students learn by doing. Through hands on, student driven application of the material, students absorb more of the information being imparted and they are able to recall and transfer that knowledge more effectively. Also, Boser encouraged educators to help students dig deeply into the topic being learned. By moving beyond surface knowledge that would historically have been approached with memorization, students are able to draw deeper meaning from the material, even applying it to their own lives and situations. Boser contended that students who are encouraged to deeply reflect upon what they have learned are able to achieve much greater master than those who were not. Vygotsky's More Capable Peers, serve to facilitate students' active reflection on their learning (Boser, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978).

In addition to reflection, Boser (Miller, 2020) also included relevance. This requires that student's should be encouraged to make the material uniquely relevant to them, so that it becomes interesting and applicable in their own life. Educators can do this by giving their

students liberty to apply knowledge as they understand it in areas of particular interest to them. With this emphasis, students are able to find their own meaning and value for the subject of their learning.

The Constructivist Classroom

What, then, are the implications for the teacher who ascribes to constructivism and desires to implement constructivist methods into the classroom? Constructivism sharply contrasts with other learning theories that perceive students as passive vessels into which educators should pour vast sums of knowledge. Two important distinctions from this theory of constructed knowledge are that, one, learners construct new understanding using foundations already learned, and, two, learning is active (Hoover, 1996). These are critical distinctions for the educator who must no longer envision himself the sole holder of knowledge. Teachers become guides, more-capable-peers, providing opportunities for students to test and adapt their current understanding.

In addition, because of the belief that knowledge is constructed on the foundation of previously acquired knowledge, educators must be acutely aware of individual students' prior education and experience (Hoover, 1996). If students are expected to construct new knowledge, they must be engaged through hands on, practical learning techniques. "If learning is a constructive process, and instruction must be designed to provide opportunities for such construction" (p. 2).

The constructivist classroom will, necessarily look, feel, and sound different than previously conceived theories taught. Students might very well be leading discussions. Hands on experiences must be valued, validated, and facilitated. Educators are not obtuse, but close by to help students make connections. Critical thinking is encouraged as students are aided in their processing of new information. Relationships with students are emphasized so that instructors are aware of context and personal knowledge among individual learners. Learners often produce unique and personal knowledge and might learn best through their own self-discovery. This requires instructors to remain actively aware but quietly observant. Discovery, guided discovery, exploration, and active learning are important. Learning is collaborative and cooperative, not just individual, and the best constructivist classrooms will be multidimensional (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2004).

Application in the Arts Administration Classroom

My class has a maximum enrollment of nineteen students and has always been filled to capacity. The course meets a general education requirement for students classified as "Scholarship in Practice." The aim of these courses is to help students become critical and independent thinkers, and also creative users of knowledge (Scholarship In Practice, n.d.). Students choose these courses based on interest, but they are not restricted to specific majors.

In my course, within the Department of Art Education, the great majority of my students come to me without a background in higher arts or cultural education. Students are generally in the final two years of their undergraduate studies, and reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the institution. Although the course topic is Arts Administration, students major study areas range as widely as criminology, actuarial science, political science, biology, and many other disciplines. Of the seventy-five students who have taken this course, only eighteen of them have been in a major or minor program of study that falls within the traditional arts disciplines.

This gap in their previously constructed scaffolding requires special attention on my part,

as the instructor. Not only do I have to educate them in the required course content, a survey of arts administration, but I must also teach many of them about the arts themselves, and why they require special administration and management. Although this has proven challenging, it has also been a highly rewarding aspect of my role as educator in this course.

In Practice: Making Arts Administration Relevant

With the wide range in student interests and pursuits, both academically and professionally, one of my central goals has been to bring specific relevance to each individual. Through syllabus design and specific assignments intended to do so, students are encouraged and required to interpret reading material beyond merely synopsizing. A full thirty percent of their grade is devoted to individual reflections that instruct them to take required reading material and apply it to an example from their own life experience. For many students, the life experience falls outside of the arts and their reflections then encourage them to incorporate the arts into those life experiences, to find commonalities and contrasts.

In addition to the written reflections, students are also introduced to guest speakers working in various specialties within arts administration, and are taken on site visits to local arts organizations of varying disciplines and missions. Guest speakers are encouraged to highlight their own educational and professional backgrounds as they share their experiences with students. Site visit facilitators are also a part of making the course objectives relevant, as students see arts administrators in action on the job.

I utilize one particular exercise conducted near the end of the semester, after students have received a broad survey of critical topics in arts administration. This activity often enlightens students with the specific applications of learned material in their own fields. I ask all students majoring in an arts field to write down five ways in which they could utilize knowledge gained through their major courses to impact fields outside of the arts. I ask students in non-arts majors to answer the opposite question. Identify five ways that you could use knowledge acquired in your major field to influence or assist the arts. The answers vary widely and are usually very creative, demonstrating genuine reflection on the transferability of skills between arts and non-arts fields. This exercise makes the entire course particularly and specifically relevant for each student. It also encourages them to critically think about post-graduation possibilities.

One final area of emphasis when attempting to make the course content broadly applicable is to simply state that it is so explicitly. When students work in groups they are reminded of the regular need to practice this skill in the professional work force. When students ask questions, after the instructor answers the question for the arts, there is a follow up question to the student about how that relates to what they are learning and practicing in their own field.

There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that these methods truly are engaging the students with the content in new ways. Through these methods, organizations that participate in site visits and guest speaking engagements have reported back to me that they see a clear increase in student engagement at their organizations. Students are increasingly requesting internship opportunities at our site visit locations, and are revisiting those venues on their own time, even bringing friends along.

End of semester course evaluations indicate the meaning students have taken from the course, as well. Student comments included:
"I never would have thought that my Art Administration class would be the course I relate most of my studies to."

"I enjoyed the days when we were learning situationally [sic], like when we took a site visit, had guest speakers, or acted out a simulation in class."

"[The instructor] made arts administration applicable to the entire class, which came from all walks of life."

"The projects challenged us to turn the theoretical into the practical by applying what we learned."

Broader Application

This survey course in arts administration includes exposure to principles of management, governance, financial planning, fundraising, marketing, advocacy, community engagement, education, and more. Within each of these topics there are unique opportunities for educators to bring practical application to the fore with their students.

For example, when we discuss "contingency budgeting" I talk about the necessary of planning for car trouble in our personal life. When we look at creating an organizational budget, I use examples of household budgets to help the students make connections. These types of examples allow students to form their own meaning, based on their own life experiences, while still engaging them in the necessary practices of the arts administrator.

Current Events

During the semesters when I taught this course, two major calamities happened within the international arts and culture world. The fire at the National Museum of Brazil and the fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris both provided unexpected, real-world, current opportunities for students to engage in course content. When each of these events occurred, I modified my course plans to incorporate these tragedies.

Students were placed in groups and given a short news article about some aspect of the fires or the recovery efforts. They were asked to look at the article as an arts administrator and answer a variety of questions. "How could effective arts administration have prevented this event?" "How can arts administration aid in the recovery?" "What stakeholders must the arts administrator work with when confronting this challenge?"

These questions provide students with a framework for how to approach the presented scenario, but still allow them to explore their own foundational beliefs and interpretations. Some students talk about contingency planning and better partnerships with government and then one student will, inevitably, say that nothing should be done. The past is the past and funding should be directed toward future projects, not resurrecting the past.

As an educator, these are the very best moments. When students problem solve amongst themselves and develop vastly different conclusions based on their own lived experiences and educational backgrounds, a diversity of thought is achieved for all and the likelihood increases that more students will be able to engage, on some level, with the content.

Mixing It Up

Boser (2019) confronted the trend in academia to attempt to manufacture relevance through courses such as "Statistics for Baseball." The idea is that statistics might seem dry but throwing in baseball makes it more exciting and relevant. However, if a student is not interested in either statistics or baseball, this tactic is not going to work for them. This effort is still an attempt to fill the empty vessel, rather than allow the students to construct their own knowledge.

There is no question that this method of teaching requires more proactive effort on the

part of the instructor. I have to consider many examples that parallel the arts lesson I am attempting to communicate. For example, in the arts administration classroom when I approach the difference between creative and administrative professionals within organizations, I might mention the management and athletic divisions of sports teams. I might also talk about administrative versus teaching professionals within schools. I present a few comparisons and then invite the students to discover their own appropriate comparison. "What relationship, in your field, is similar?" Not only does this simple question invite them to deeply consider the topic, it also brings clearer understanding and personal relevance.

Specific Strategies

Written Reflections

You will note how often I reference "reflection" as critical to student construction of knowledge. The more opportunity they are given to specifically ponder the lesson, the more they grasp the information and develop the ability to transfer that knowledge. One assignment in my course, the previously mentioned written reflection, is central to this objective. Students are asked to reflect on the week's literature by drawing a parallel between the reading and something from their own life, discipline, or experiences.

At the beginning of the semester I read a fair number of chapter summaries. It seems this is what students are accustomed to producing for many other professors. However, through guidance, encouragement, and feedback, by the end of the semester, students are making genuine connections between the course content in my class and things from current events or from other classes.

Guest Speakers

Introducing professionals who entered the field of arts administration from other disciplines is effective for my class. Learning the many different ways that one may utilize skills and education makes the skills I introduce feel more important. In addition, I do not restrict discussions to only topics of arts administration.

When discussing Creative Unions, we also discuss Teamsters and other Unionized professionals. You might wonder why I take this approach, but time and again I find that by exploring relevance beyond arts administration, students are more engaged with arts administration. They understand that it has something to do with them.

Site Visits

The physical, or even virtual, site visit, allows students to experience first-hand, the application of arts administration within an organizational setting. For this reason, I provide a diversity of organizational experiences throughout the semester.

We visit cultural museums, university museums, arts education organizations, and history museums. This spectrum of organizational exposure allows students to engage where the conversation feels relevant to them. By providing multiple avenues for connection, students are given the necessary tools to construct their learning.

Assignments

Classwork in this course requires collaboration. This is an important component of constructivism. Students working socially guide one another to understanding. Because my

students come from diverse disciplines, backgrounds, and experiences, they have much to offer one another. By encouraging them to work together, and providing regular opportunities for them to do so, I am enabling them to absorb, understand, and apply new knowledge.

Conclusion

 It seems unnecessary to state, but no two people are quite the same. We prefer different things and engage uniquely. In my student course evaluations for one semester I received feedback from a student that the videos I utilized in class were enjoyable and helpful, making class more interesting. That same semester another student commented that the videos seemed unnecessary and the student preferred when I taught without them. This difference in our preferences and methods of engagement is precisely why allowing students to initiate their own learning, with guidance from the instructor, is needed for students to find their own relevance in the content.

While the constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning can be applied in a variety of classroom settings, there is special relevance in the arts administration classroom that brings together students from diverse backgrounds both within and out of those disciplines traditionally categorized as "the arts." The arts administration educator must first make the arts relevant. Only if they achieve that first objective can they proceed to make successful administration of the arts important and relevant to their student populations.

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